

Merwin Samuel

The Road Builders



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«Public Domain»

Merwin S.

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CHAPTER I

YOUNG VAN ENGAGES A COOK

The S. & W. was hoping some day to build a large station with a steel and glass trainshed at Sherman. Indeed, a side elevation of the structure, drawn to scale and framed in black walnut, had hung for a number of years in the private office, away down east, of President Daniel De Reamer. But that was to come in the day when Sherman should be a metropolis; at present the steel of which it was to be constructed still lay deep in the earth, unblasted, unsmelted, and unconverted; and the long, very dirty train which, at the time this narrative opens, was waiting to begin its westward journey, lay exposed to the rays of what promised to be, by noon, the hottest sun the spring had so far known. The cars were of an old, ill-ventilated[Pg 1][Pg 2] sort, and the laborers, who were packed within them like cattle in a box-car, had shed coats and even shirts, and now sat back, and gasped and grumbled and fanned themselves with their caps, and steadily lost interest in life.

Apparently there was some uncertainty back in the office of the superintendent. A red-faced man, with a handkerchief around his neck, ran out with an order; whereupon an engine backed in, coupled up to the first car, and whistled impatiently. But they did not go. Half an hour passed, and the red-faced man ran out again, and the engine uncoupled, snorted, rang its bell, and disappeared whence it had come.

At length two men – Peet, the superintendent, and Tiffany, chief engineer of the railroad – walked down the platform together, and addressed a stocky man with a close-cut gray mustache and a fixed frown, who stood beside the rear car.

“Peet says he can’t wait any longer, Mr. Vandervelt,” said Tiffany.

“Can’t help that,” replied Vandervelt.

“But you’ve got to help it!” cried Peet. “What are you waiting for, anyway?”

“If you think we’re starting without Paul Carhart, you’re mistaken.”

“Carhart! Who is Carhart?”

“That’s all right,” Tiffany put in. “He’s in charge of the construction.”

“I don’t care what he is! This train – ”

He was interrupted by a sudden uproar in the car just ahead. A number of Italians had chosen to enliven the occasion by attacking the Mexicans, some of whom had unavoidably been assigned to this car.

Vandervelt left the railroad men without a word, bounded up the car steps, and plunged through the door. The confusion continued for a moment, then died down. Another moment, and Vandervelt reappeared on the platform.

Meanwhile Tiffany was talking to the superintendent.

“You’ve simply got to wait, Peet,” said he. “The old man says that Carhart must have a free hand. If he’s late, there’s a reason for it.”

“The old man didn’t say that to me,” growled Peet; but he waited.

It would perhaps be difficult to find, in the history of American enterprise, an undertaking which demanded greater promptness in execution than the present one; yet, absurdly enough, the cause of the delay was a person so insignificant that, even for the purposes of this narrative, his name hardly matters. The name happened to be, however, Purple Finn, and he had been engaged for chief cook to the first division.

There was but one real hotel in the “city,” which is to be known here as Sherman, the half-dozen other places that bore the title of hotel being rather in the nature of a side line to the saloon and gambling industry. At this one, which was indicated by a projecting sign and the words “Eagle, House,” Carhart and his engineers were stopping. “The Comma House,” as the instrument men and stake men had promptly dubbed it, was not very large and not very clean, and the “razor back” hogs and their progeny had a way of sleeping in rows on and about the low piazza. But it was, nevertheless, the best hotel in that particular part of the Southwest.

Finn, on the other hand, made his headquarters at one of the half dozen, that one which was known to the submerged seven-eighths as “Murphy’s.” That Finn should be an enthusiastic patron of the poor man’s club was not surprising, considering that he was an Irish plainsman of a culinary turn, and considering, too, that he was now winding up one of those periods between jobs, which begin in spacious hilarity and conclude with a taste of ashes in the mouth.

It was late afternoon. The chief was sitting in his room, before a table which was piled high with maps, blue-prints, invoices, and letters. All day long he had been sitting at this table, going over the details of the work in hand. Old Vandervelt had reported that the rails and bolts and ties and other necessities were on the cars; Flint and Scribner had reported for their divisions; the statements of the various railroad officials had been examined, to make sure that no details were overlooked, for these would, sooner or later, bob up in the form of misunderstandings; the thousand and one things which must be considered before the expedition should take the plunge into the desert had apparently been disposed of. And finally, when the large clock down in the office was announcing, with a preliminary rattle and click, that it intended very shortly to strike the half-hour between five and six, the chief pushed back his chair and looked up at his engineers, who were seated about him – Old Van before him on a trunk; Scribner and Young Van beside him on the bed; John Flint, a thin, sallow man, astride the other chair, and Haddon on the floor with his back against the wall.

“All accounted for, Paul, I guess,” said Flint.

Carhart replied with a question, “How about those iron rods, John?”

“All checked off and packed on the train.”

“Did you accept Doble and Dean’s estimate for your oats?”

“Not much. Cut it down a third. It was altogether too much to carry. You see, I shall be only thirty-odd miles from Red Hills, once I get out there, and I don’t look for any trouble keeping in touch.”

“It’s just as well,” said Carhart. “The less you carry, the more room for us.”

“Did those pots and kettles come, Gus?” Carhart asked, turning to the younger Vandervelt, who was to act as his secretary and general assistant.

“Yes; just before noon. They had been carried on to Paradise by mistake. I got them right aboard.”

“And you were going to keep an eye on that cook. Where is he?”

Young Van hesitated, and an expression of chagrin came into his face.

“I’ll look him up. He promised me last night that he wouldn’t touch another drop.”

“Well – get your hands on him, and don’t let go again.”

Young Van left the room, and as he drew the door to after him he could hear the chief saying: “Haddon, I wish you would find Tiffany and remind him that I’m counting on his getting around early to-night. I’m not altogether satisfied with their scheme for supplying us.” And hearing this, he was more than ever conscious of his own small part in this undertaking, and more than ever chagrined that he should prove unequal to the very small matter of keeping an eye on the cook. At least, it seemed a small matter, in view of the hundreds of problems concerning men and things which Paul Carhart was solving on this day.

The barkeeper at Murphy’s, who served also in the capacity of night clerk, proved secretive on the subject of Purple Finn – hadn’t seen him all day – didn’t know when he would be in. The young

engineer thought he had better sit down to digest the situation. This suggested supper, and he ordered the best of Murphy's fare, and ate slowly and pondered. Seven o'clock came, but brought no hint of the cook's whereabouts. Young Van gathered from the barroom talk that a big outfit had come into town from Paradise within the past hour or so, and incidentally that one of the outfit, Jack Flagg, was on the warpath – whoever Jack Flagg might be. As he sat in a rear corner, watching, with an assumption of carelessness, the loafers and plainsmen and gamblers who were passing in and out, or were, like himself, sitting at the round tables, it occurred to him to go up to Finn's room. He knew, from former calls, where it was. But he learned nothing more than that the cook's door was ajar, and that a half-packed valise lay open on the bed.

At half-past ten, after a tour of the most likely haunts, Young Van returned to Murphy's and resumed his seat in the rear corner. He had no notion of returning to the Eagle House without the cook. It was now close on the hour when Sherman was used to rouse itself for the revelry of the night, and that Finn would take some part in this revelry, and that he would, sooner or later, reappear at his favorite hostelry, seemed probable.

The lamps in this room were suspended from the ceiling at such a height that their light entered the eye at the hypnotic angle; and so it was not long before Young Van, weary from the strain of the week, began to nod. The bar with its line of booted figures, and the quartets of card-players, and the one waiter moving about in his spotted white apron, were beginning to blur and run together. The clink of glasses and the laughter came to his ears as if from a great distance. Once he nearly recovered his faculties. A group of new arrivals were looking toward his corner. "Waiting for Purple Finn, eh?" said one. "Well, I guess he's got a nice long wait in front of him, poor fool!" Then they all laughed. And Young Van himself, with half-open eyes, had to smile over the poor fool in the corner who was waiting for Purple Finn.

"I hear Jack Flagg's in town," said the barkeeper. "I wonder if he is!" replied the first speaker. "I wonder if Jack Flagg is in town!" Again they laughed. And again Young Van smiled. How odd that Jack Flagg should be in town!

He was awakened by a sound of hammering. There was little change in the room: the card games were going steadily on; the bar still had its line of thirsty plainsmen; two men were wrangling in a corner. Then he made out a group of newcomers who were tacking a placard to the wall, and chuckling as they did so.

And now, for the first time, Young Van became conscious that he was no longer alone at his table. Opposite him, smiling genially, and returning his gaze with benevolent watery eyes, sat a big Texan. This individual wore his cowboy hat on the back of his head, and made no effort to conceal the two revolvers and the knife at his belt.

"D'ye know," said the Texan, "I like you. What's your name?"

"Vandervelt. What is yours?"

"Charlie – that's my name." Then his smile faded, and he shook his head. "But you won't find Purple Finn here."

"Why not?"

"Ain't that funny! You don't know 'bout Purple Finn. It's b'cause Jack Flagg's in town. They ain't friendly – I know Jack Flagg. I've been workin' with 'im – down Paradise way."

Young Van was nearly awake. "You don't happen to be a cook, do you?" said he.

"Yes," Charlie replied dreamily. "I'm a cook. But I'm nothin' to Jack Flagg. He's won'erful – won'erful!"

The engineer got up to stretch his legs, and incidentally took occasion to read the placard. It ran as follows: —

Purple Finn: I heard you was looking for me. Well, I'll be around to Murphy's to-morrow because I want to tell you you're talking too much.

JACK FLAGG.

He returned to his table, and amused himself listening to Charlie's talk. Then he looked at his watch and found that it was nearly two hours after midnight. Within six or seven hours the train would be starting. He wondered what his friends would say if they could see him. He was afraid that if he should drop off again, he might sleep too late, and so he determined to keep awake. He communicated this plan to Charlie, who nodded approval. But he was not equal to it. Within a very short time his chin was reposing on his breast, and Charlie was looking at him and chuckling. "Awful good joke," murmured Charlie.

Young Van fell to dreaming. He thought that the doors suddenly swung in, and that Purple Finn himself entered the room. The noise seemed, at the instant, to die down; the barkeeper paused and gazed; the card-players turned and sat motionless in their chairs. Finn, thought Young Van, nodded in a general way, and laughed, and his laugh had no humor in it. He walked toward the bar, but halfway his roving eye rested on the placard, and he stood motionless. The blue tobacco haze curled around him and dimmed the outlines of his figure. In the dream he seemed to grow a little smaller while he stood there. Then he walked across and read the placard, taking a long time about it, as if he found it difficult to grasp the meaning. When he finally turned and faced the crowd, his expression was weak and uncertain. He seemed about to say something but whatever it was he wished to say, the words did not come. Instead, he walked to the bar, ordered a drink, put it down with a shaking hand, and left the room as he had entered it, silently. The door swung shut, and somebody laughed; then all returned to their cards.

When Young Van awoke, the room was flooded with sunlight from the side windows. He straightened up in his chair and looked around. Charlie was still at the table. Here and there along the side bench men were sleeping. The card-players, with seamed faces and cold eyes, were still at their business. A new set of players had come in, one of them a giant of a man, dressed like a cowboy, with a hard eye, a heavy mustache, and a tuft of hair below his under lip.

The engineer was almost afraid to look at his watch. It was half-past eight. He turned to the still smiling Charlie. "See here," he said, "did Finn come in here last night?"

Charlie nodded. "You didn't wake up."

Young Van almost groaned aloud. "Where is he? Where did he go?"

"Listen to 'im!" Charlie was indicating a lank stranger who was leaning on the bar, and talking to a dozen men who had gathered about him.

"... And when I got off the train," the lank man was saying, "there was Purple Finn a-standin' on the platform. I thought he looked sort o' caved in. 'Hello, Purple,' says I, 'what you doin' up so early in the mornin'?' But he never answers a word; just climbs on the train and sits down in the smoker and looks out the window as if he thought somebody was after 'im."

A laugh went up at this, and all the group turned and looked at the big man with the mustache. But this individual went on fingering his cards without the twitch of an eyelid.

"So Finn has left town," said Young Van, addressing his vis-a-vis.

"Yes," Charlie replied humorously. "He had to see a man down to Paradise."

"Who is that big man over there?"

"Him?" Charlie's voice dropped. "Why, that's him – Jack Flagg."

"Did you tell me last night that he was a cook?"

Charlie nodded. "He's won'erful – won'erful! I know 'im. I've been workin' – "

Young Van pushed back his chair and got up. For a moment he stood looking at the forbidding face and mighty frame of the man who was now the central figure in the room; then he crossed over

and touched him on the shoulder. "How are you?" said he, painfully conscious, as every waking eye in the room was turned on him, that he did not know how to talk to these men.

Flagg looked up.

"They tell me you can cook," said the engineer.

"What's that to you?" said Flagg.

"Do you want a job?"

"This is Mr. Van'ervelt," put in Charlie, who had followed; "Mr. Van'ervelt, of the railroad."

"What'll you pay?" asked Flagg.

Young Van named the amount.

"When do you want to start?"

"Now."

"Charlie," – Flagg was sweeping in a heap of chips, – "go down to Jim's and get my things and fetch 'em here." And with this he turned back to the game.

Young Van looked uncertainly at Charlie, whose condition was hardly such that he could be trusted to make the trip without a series of stops in the numerous havens of refuge along the way. The thing to do was perhaps to go with him; at any rate, that is what Young Van did.

"Won'erful man!" murmured Charlie, when they reached the sidewalk. Then, "Say, Mr. Van'ervelt, come over here a minute – jus' over to Bill White's. Wanna see a man, – jus' minute."

But Young Van was not in a tolerant mood. "Stiffen up, Charlie," he said sharply. "No more of this sort of thing – not if you're going with us."

Charlie was meekly obedient, and even tried to hurry; but at the best it took considerable time to get together the clothing of the cook and his assistant, pay their bill, and return to Murphy's. This much accomplished, it became necessary to use some tact with Flagg, who was bent on winning a little more before stopping. And as Flagg could easily have tossed the engineer out of the window, and had, besides, the strategical advantage, Young Van was unable to see much choice for himself in the matter. And standing there, waiting on the pleasure of his cook, he passed the time in wondering where he had made his mistake. Paul Carhart, or John Flint, he thought, would never have found it necessary to take the undignified measures to which he had been reduced. But what was the difference? What would they have done? In trying to answer these questions he hit on every reason but the right one. He forgot that he was a young man.

Carhart and Flint, after waiting a long time at the "Eagle, House," went down to the station, arriving there some time after the outburst of Peet, which was noted at the beginning of the chapter. Tiffany saw them coming, and communicated the news to the superintendent. The engine reappeared, and again coupled up to the forward car.

"Everything all right?" called Tiffany.

"No," replied Carhart; "don't start yet."

The three walked on and joined Old Van by the steps of the rear car.

"Well," growled the veteran, "how much longer are we going to wait, Paul?"

"Until Gus comes."

"Gus? I thought he was aboard here."

"No," said John Flint, with a wink; "he went out last night to see the wheels go round. Here he comes now. But what in –"

They all gazed without a word. Three men were walking abreast down the platform, Gus Vandervelt, with a white face and ringed eyes, in the middle. The youngest engineer of the outfit was not a small man, but between the two cooks he looked like a child.

"Would you look at that!" said Flint, at length. "Neither of those two Jesse Jameses will ever see six-foot-three again. Makes Gus look like a nick in a wall."

Young Van met Carhart's questioning gaze almost defiantly. "The cook," he said, indicating Flagg.

“All right. Get aboard.”

“Rear car,” cried Old Van, who had charge of the arrangements on the train.

This time the bell did not ring in vain. The train moved slowly out toward the unpeopled West, and the engineers threw off coats and collars, and made themselves as nearly comfortable as they could under the circumstances.

A few minutes after the start Paul Carhart, who was writing a letter in pencil, looked up and saw Young Van beside him, and tried not to smile at his sorry appearance.

“I think I owe you an explanation, Mr. Carhart,” began the young man, in embarrassment which took the form of stiffness.

But the chief shook his head. “I’m not asking any questions, Gus,” he replied. Then the smile escaped him, and he turned it off by adding, “I’m writing to Mrs. Carhart.” He held up the letter and glanced over the first few lines with a twinkle in his eyes. “I was just telling her,” he went on, “that the cook problem in Chicago is in its infancy.”

CHAPTER II

WHERE THE MONEY CAME FROM

Doubtless there were official persons to be found at the time of this narrative – which is a matter of some thirty years back – who would have insisted that the letters “S. & W.” meant “Sherman and Western.” But every one who lived within two days’ ride of the track knew that the real name of the road was the “Shaky and Windy.”

Shaky the “S. & W.” certainly was – physically, and, if newspaper gossip and apparent facts were to be trusted, financially. The rails weighed thirty-five pounds to the yard, and had been laid in scallops, with high centres and low joints, – “sight along the rails and it looks like a washboard,” said John Flint, describing it. For ballast the clay and sand of the region were used. And, as for the financial part, everybody knew that old De Reamer had been forced to abandon the construction work on the Red Hills extension, after building fully five-sixths of the distance. The hard times had, of course, something to do with that, – roads were going under all through the West; receiverships were quite the common thing, – but De Reamer and the S. & W. did not seem to revive so quickly as certain other lines. This was the more singular in that the S. & W., extending as it did from the Sabine country to the Staked Plains, really justified the popular remark that “the Shaky and Windy began in a swamp and ended in a desert.” On the face of things, without the Red Hills connection with the bigger C. & S. C., and without an eastern connection with one of the New Orleans or St. Louis lines, the road was an absurdity.

Then, only a few months before the time of our narrative, the railroad world began to wake up. Commodore Durfee, one of “the big fellows,” surprised the Southwest by buying in the H. D. & W. (which meant, and will always mean, the High, Dry, and Wobbly). The surprise was greater when the Commodore began building southwestward, in the general direction of Red Hills. As usual when the big men are playing for position, the public and the wise-acres, even Wall Street, were mystified. For the S. & W. was so obviously the best and shortest eastern connection for the C. & S. C., – the H. D. & W. would so plainly be a differential line, – that it was hard to see what the Commodore was about. He had nothing to say to the reporters. Old General Carrington, of the C. & S. C., the biggest and shrewdest of them all, was also silent. And Daniel De Reamer couldn’t be seen at all.

And finally, by way of a wind-up to the first skirmish of the picturesque war in which our engineers were soon to find themselves taking part, there was a western breeze and a flurry of dust in Wall Street. Somebody was fighting. S. & W. shares ran up in a day from twenty-two to forty-six, and, which was more astonishing, sold at that figure for another day before dropping. Other mysterious things were going on. Suddenly De Reamer reappeared in the Southwest, and that most welcome sign of vitality, money, – red gold corpuscles, – began to flow through the arteries of the S. & W. “system.” The construction work started up, on rush orders. Paul Carhart was specially engaged to take out a force and complete the track – any sort of a track – to Red Hills. And as he preferred not to take this rush work through very difficult country on any other terms, De Reamer gave him something near a free hand, – ordered Chief Engineer Tiffany to let him alone, beyond giving every assistance in getting material to the front, and accepting the track for the company as fast as it was laid.

And as Tiffany was not at all a bad fellow, and had admired Carhart’s part in the Rio Grande fight (though he would have managed some things differently, not to say better, himself), the two engineers seemed likely to get on very well.

Carhart’s three trains would hardly get over the five hundred miles which lay between Sherman and the end of the track in less than twenty-seven or twenty-eight hours. “The private car,” as the boys called it, was of an old type even for those days, and was very uncomfortable. Everybody, from the chief down, had shed coat and waistcoat before the ragged skyline of Sherman slipped out of view

behind the yellow pine trees. The car swayed and lurched so violently that it was impossible to stand in the aisle without support. As the hours dragged by, several of the party curled up on the hard seats and tried to sleep. The instrument and rod and stake men and the pile inspectors, mostly young fellows recently out of college or technical institute, got together at one end of the car and sang college songs.

Carhart was sitting back, his feet up on the opposite seat, watching for the pines to thin out, and thinking of the endless gray chaparral and sage-brush which they would find about them in the morning, – if the train didn't break down, – when he saw Tiffany's big person balancing down the aisle toward him. Tiffany had been quiet a long time; now he had a story in his eye.

"Well," he said, as he slid down beside Carhart, "I knew the old gentleman would pull it off in time, but I never supposed he could make the Commodore pay the bills."

Carhart glanced up inquiringly.

"Didn't you hear about it? Well, say! I happen to know that a month ago Mr. De Reamer actually didn't have the money to carry this work through. Even when Commodore Durfee started building for Red Hills, he didn't know which way to turn. The Commodore, you know, hadn't any notion of stopping with the H.D. & W."

"No," said Carhart, "I didn't suppose he had."

"He was after us, too – wanted to do the same as he did with the High and Dry, corner the stock." Tiffany chuckled. "But he knew he'd have to corner Daniel De Reamer first. If he didn't, the old gentleman would manufacture shares by the hundred thousand and pump 'em right into him. There's the Paradise Southern, – that's been a regular fountain of stock. You knew about that."

Carhart shook his head.

"We passed through Paradise this noon."

"Yes, I know the line. It runs down from Paradise to Total Wreck. But I didn't know it had anything to do with S. & W. capital stock."

"Didn't, eh?" chuckled Tiffany. "Mr. De Reamer and Mr. Chambers own it, you know, and they're directors in both lines. The old game was for them, as P. S. directors, to lease the short line to themselves as S. & W. directors. Then the S. & W. directors pay the P. S. directors – only they're it both ways – in S. & W. stock. Don't you see? And it's only one of a dozen schemes. The old gentleman's always ready for S. & W. buyers."

Carhart smiled. The car lurched and shivered. Such air as came in through the open door and windows was tainted with the gases of the locomotive, and with the mingled odors of the densely packed laborers in the cars ahead.

"That's really the only reason they've kept up the Paradise Southern – for there isn't any business on the line. Well, as I was saying, the Commodore knew that the first thing he had to do was corner Mr. De Reamer, and keep him from creating stock. So he came down on him all at once, with a heap of injunctions and court orders. He did it thorough: restrained the S. & W. board from issuing any more stock, or from completing any of the transactions on hand, and temporarily suspended the old gentleman and Mr. Chambers, pending an investigation of their accounts, and ordered 'em to return to the treasury of the company the seventy thousand shares they created last year. There was a lot more, but that's the gist of it. He did it through Waring and his other minority directors on the board. And right at the start, you see, when he began to buy, he made S. & W. stock so scarce that the price shot up."

"Seems as if he had sewed up the S. & W. pretty tight," observed Carhart.

"Didn't it, though? But the Commodore didn't know the old gentleman as well as he thought. Mr. De Reamer and Mr. Chambers got another judge to issue orders for them to do everything the Commodore's judge forbid – tangled it all up so that everything they did or didn't do, they'd be disobeying somebody, and leaving it for the judges to settle among themselves. Then they issued ten million dollars in convertible bonds to a dummy, representing themselves, turned 'em right into stock, – and tangled that transaction up so nobody in earth or heaven will ever know just exactly

what was done, – and sold ‘most seventy thousand shares of it to Commodore Durfee before he had a glimmer of where it was coming from. And then it was too late for him to stop buying, so he had to take in the whole hundred thousand shares. I heard Mr. Chambers say that when the Commodore found ‘em out, he was so mad he couldn’t talk, – stormed around his office trying to curse Daniel De Reamer, but he couldn’t even swear intelligent.”

“So Mr. De Reamer beat him,” said Carhart.

“Beat him? – I wonder – ”

“But that’s not all, surely. Commodore Durfee isn’t the man to swallow that.”

“He *had* to swallow it. – Oh, he did kick up some fuss, but it didn’t do him any good. His judge tried to jerk up our people for contempt, but they were warned and got out of Mr. De Reamer’s Broad Street office, and over into New Jersey with all the documents and money.” Tiffany’s good-humored eyes lighted up as his mind dwelt on the fight. Never was there a more loyal railroad man than this one. Daniel De Reamer was his king, and his king could do no wrong. “Not that they didn’t have some excitement getting away,” he continued. “They say, – mind, I don’t know this, but *they* say that Mr. De Reamer’s secretary, young Crittenden, crossed the ferry in a cab with four million five hundred thousand dollars *in bills*– just tied up rough in bundles so they could be thrown around. And there you are, – Commodore Durfee is paying for this extension that’s going to cut him out of the C. & S. C. through business. The money and papers are out of his reach. The judges are fighting among themselves, and will be doing well if they ever come to a settlement. And now if that ain’t pretty slick business, I’d like to know what the word ‘slick’ means.”

Carhart almost laughed aloud. He turned and looked out the window for a few moments. Finally he said, “If you have that straight, Tiffany, it’s undoubtedly the worst defeat Commodore Durfee ever had. But don’t make the mistake of thinking that the S. & W. is through with him.”

“Maybe not,” Tiffany replied, “but I’ll bet proper on the old gentleman.”

Carhart’s position as the engineer in charge of a thousand and more men would be not unlike that of a military commander who finds himself dependent for subsistence on five hundred miles of what Scribner called “very sketchy” single track. It would be more serious; for not only must food, and in the desert, water, be brought out over the line, but also the vast quantity of material needed in the work. It would be the business of Peet, as the working head of the operating department, to deliver the material from day to day, and week to week, at the end of the last completed section, where the working train would be made up each night for the construction work of the following day.

If the existing track was sketchy, the new track would be worse. Everything was to be sacrificed to speed. The few bridges were to be thrown up hastily in the form of primitive wooden trestles. There would be no masonry, excepting the abutments of the La Paz bridge, – which masonry, or rather the stone for it, was about the only material they would find at hand. All the timber, even to the cross ties, would have to be shipped forward from the long-leaf-pine forests of eastern Texas and western Louisiana.

Ordinarily, Carhart would not have relished undertaking such a hasty job; but in this case there were compensations. When he had first looked over the location maps, in Daniel De Reamer’s New York office, his quiet eyes had danced behind their spectacles; for it promised to be pretty work, in which a man could use his imagination. There was the bridge over the La Paz River, for instance. He should have to send a man out there with a long wagon train of materials, and with orders to have the bridge ready when the track should reach the river. He knew just the man – John B. Flint, who built the Desplaines bridge for the three I’s. He had not heard from John since the doctors had condemned his lungs, and ordered him to a sanatorium in the Adirondacks, and John had compromised by going West, and hanging that very difficult bridge between the walls of Brilliant Gorge in the Sierras. Carhart was not sure that he was still among the living; but a few searching telegrams brought out a characteristic message from John himself, to the effect that he was very much alive, and was ready to bridge the Grand Cañon of the Colorado at a word from Paul Carhart.

Then there was always to be considered the broad outline of the situation as it was generally understood in the railway world. Details apart, it was known that Commodore Durfee and Daniel De Reamer were fighting for that through connection, and that old General Carrington, – czar of the C. & S. C., holder of one and owner of several other seats in the Senate of these United States, chairman of the National Committee of his party, – that General Carrington was sitting on the piazza of his country house in California, smoking good cigars and talking horse and waiting to see whether he should gobble Durfee or De Reamer, or both of them. For the general, too, was represented on the directorate of the Sherman and Western; and it was an open question whether his minority directors would continue to support the De Reamer interests or would be ordered to ally themselves with the Durfee men. Either way, there would be no sentiment wasted. But it seemed to Carhart that so long as De Reamer should be able to hold up his head in the fight General Carrington would probably stand behind him. Commodore Durfee was too big in the East to be encouraged in the West. And yet – there was no telling.

It was very pretty indeed. Carhart was a quiet man, given more to study than to speech; but he liked pretty things.

CHAPTER III

AT MR. CARHART'S CAMP

"It takes an Irishman, a nigger, and a mule to build a railroad," said Tiffany.

With Young Van, he was standing in front of the headquarters tent, which, together with the office tent for the first division, where Old Van would hold forth, and the living and mess tents for the engineers, was pitched on a knoll at a little distance from the track.

"The mule," he continued, "will do the work, the nigger will drive the mule, and the Irishman'll boss 'em both."

Young Van, keyed up by this sudden plunge into frontier work, was only half listening to the flow of good-natured comment and reminiscence from the chief engineer at his elbow. He was looking at the steam-shrouded locomotive, and at the long line of cars stringing off in perspective behind it. Wagons were backed in against this and the few other trains which had come in during the day; other wagons were crawling about the track almost as far as he could see through the steam and the dust. Men on horseback – picturesque figures in wide-brimmed hats and blue shirts and snug-fitting boots laced to the knee – were riding in and out among the teams. The old track ended in the immediate foreground, and here old Van was at work with his young surveyors, looking up the old stakes and driving new ones to a line set by a solemn youngster with skinny hands and a long nose. Everywhere was noise – a babel of it – and toil and a hearty sort of chaos. One line of wagons – laden with scrapers, "slips" and "wheelers," tents and camp equipage, the timbers and machinery of a pile-driver, and a thousand and one other things – was little by little extricating itself from the tangle, winding slowly past head-quarters, and on toward the low-lying, blood-red sun. This was the outfit of the second division, and Harry Scribner, riding a wiry black pony, was leading it into corral on "mile two," preparatory to a start in the early morning.

From the headquarters cook tent, behind the "office," came savory odors. Farther down the knoll, near the big "boarding house" tents, the giant Flagg and the equally sturdy Charlie could be seen moving about a row of iron kettles which were swinging over an open fire. The chaos about the trains was straightening out, and the men were corralling the wagons, and unharnessing the mules and horses. The sun slipped down behind the low western hills, leaving a luminous memory in the far sky. In groups, and singly, the laborers – Mexicans, Italians, Louisiana French, broken plainsmen from everywhere, and negroes – came straggling by, their faces streaked with dust and sweat, the negroes laughing and singing as they lounged and shuffled along.

Carhart, who had been dividing his attention between the unloading of the trains and the preparations of his division engineers, came riding up the knoll on "Texas," his compact little roan, a horse he had ridden and boasted about in a quiet way for nearly four years. John Flint, thin and stooping of body, with a scrawny red mustache and high-pitched voice, soon rode in over the grade from the farther side of the right of way, where he was packing up his outfit for the long haul to the La Paz River. The instrument men and their assistants followed, one by one, and fell in line at the tin wash-basin, all exuberant with banter and laughter and high-spirited play. And at last the headquarters cook, a stout negro, came out in front of the mess tent and beat his gong with mighty strokes; and Harry Scribner, who was jogging back to camp from his corral, heard it, dug in his spurs, and came up the long knoll on the gallop.

There was no escaping the joviality of this first evening meal in camp. In the morning the party would break up. Scribner would ride ahead a dozen miles to make a division camp of his own; John Flint would be pushing out there into the sunset for the better part of a week, across the desert, through the gray hills, and down to the yellow La Paz. The youngsters were shy at first; but after Tiffany had winked and said, "It'll never do to start this dry, boys," and had produced a bottle from

some mysterious corner, they felt easier. Even Carhart, for the time, laid aside the burden which, like Christian, he must carry for many days. A good many stories were told, most of them by Tiffany, who had run the gamut of railroading, north, south, east, and west.

“That was a great time we had up at Pittsburgh,” said he, “when I stole the gondola cars,” – he placed the accent on the *do*, – “best thing I ever did. That was when I was on the Almighty and Great Windy that used to run from Pittsburg up to the New York State line. I was acting as a sort of traffic superintendent, among other things, – we had to do all sorts of work then; no picking and choosing and no watching the clock for us.” He turned on the long-nosed instrument man. “That was when you were just about a promising candidate for long pants, my friend.”

“We had a new general manager – named MacBayne. He didn’t know anything about railroading, – had been a telegraph operator and Durfee’s nephew, – yes, the same old Commodore, it was, – and, getting boosted up quick, that way, he got into that frame of mind where he wouldn’t ever have contradicted you if you’d said he *was* the Almighty and Great Windy. First thing he did was to put in a system of bells to call us to his office, – but I didn’t care such a heap. He enjoyed it so. He’d lean back and pull a little handle, and then be too busy to talk when one of us came running in – loved to make us stand around a spell. Hadn’t but one eye, MacBayne hadn’t, and you never could tell for downright certain who he was swearing at.

“The company had bought a little railroad, the P. G. – Pittsburg and Gulf, – for four hundred and fifty thousand. Just about such a line as our Paradise spur, only instead of the directors buying it personal, they’d bought it for the company.

“One day my little bell tinkled, and I got up and went into the old man’s office. He was smoking a cigar and trying to look through a two-foot wall into Herb Williams’s pickle factory. Pretty soon he swung his one good eye around on me and looked at me sharp. ‘Hen,’ he said, ‘we’re in a fix. We haven’t paid but two hundred thousand on the P.G. – and what’s more, that’s all we can pay.’

“‘Well, sir,’ said I, ‘what’s the trouble?’ It’s funny – he’s always called me Hen, and I’ve always called him sir and Mister MacBayne. He ain’t anybody to-day, but if I went back to Pittsburg tomorrow and met him in Morrison’s place, he’d say, ‘Well, Hen, how’re you making it?’ and I’d say, ‘Pretty well, Mister MacBayne.’ – Ain’t it funny? Can’t break away from it.

“I’ve just had a wire from Black,’ said he, – Black was our attorney up at Buffalo, – ‘saying that the sheriff of Erie County,’ over the line in New York State, ‘has attached all our *gondola* cars up there, and won’t release ’em until we pay up. What’ll we do?’

“‘Hum!’ said I. ‘We’ve got just a hundred and twenty *gondolas* in Buffalo to-day.’ A hundred and twenty cars was a lot to us, you understand – just like it would be to the S. & W. Imagine what would happen to you fellows out here if Peet had that many cars taken away from him. So I thought a minute, and then I said, ‘Has the sheriff chained ’em to the track, Mister MacBayne?’

“‘I don’t know about that,’ said he.

“‘Well,’ said I, ‘don’t you think it would be a good plan to find that out first thing?’

“He looked at me sharp, then he sort o’ grinned. ‘What’re you thinking about, Hen?’ he asked.

“I didn’t answer direct. ‘You find that out,’ I told him, ‘and let me know what he says.’

“About an hour later the bell tinkle-winkled again. ‘No,’ he said, when I went in his office, ‘they ain’t chained down – not yet, anyway. Now, what’ll we do?’

“‘Why don’t you go up there?’ said I. ‘Hook your car on to No. 5’ – that was our night express for Buffalo, a long string of oil and coal cars with a baggage car, coach, and sleeper on the end of it. It ran over our line and into Buffalo over the Southeastern.

“‘All right, Hen,’ said he. ‘Will you go along?’

“‘Sure,’ I told him.

“On our way out we picked up Charlie Greenman too. He was superintendent of the State Line Division – tall, thin man, very nervous, Charlie was.

“Next morning, when we were sitting over our breakfast in the Swift House, the old man turned his good eye on me and said, ‘Well, Hen, what next?’ I’d brought him up there, you see, and now he was looking for results.

“‘Well,’ said I, speaking slow and sort of thinking it over, ‘look here, Mister MacBayne, why don’t you get a horse and buggy and look around the city? They say it’s a pretty place. Or you could pick up a boat, you and Charlie, and go sailing on Lake Erie. Or you might run over and see the falls – Ever been there?’

“The old man was looking on both sides of me with those two eyes of his. ‘What are you up to, Hen?’ he said.

“‘Nothing,’ I answered, ‘not a thing. But say, Mister MacBayne, I forgot to bring any money. Let me have a little, will you, – about a hundred and fifty?’

“When I said that, the old man gulped, and looked almost scared. I saw then, just what I’d suspected, that he wouldn’t be the least use to me. I’d ‘a’ done better to have left him behind. ‘Why, yes, Hen,’ said he, ‘I can let you have that!’ He went out, and pretty soon he came back with the money in a big roll of small bills.

“‘Well, good morning, gentlemen,’ said I. ‘I’ll see you at five o’clock this afternoon.’

“I went right out to the Erie yards, where they were unloading twenty-two of our coal cars. Jim Harvey was standing near by, and he gave me a queer look, and asked me what I was doing in Buffalo.

“‘Doing?’ said I, ‘I’m looking after my cars. What did you suppose? And see here, Jim, while you were about it, don’t you think you might have put ’em together. Here you’ve got twenty-two of ’em, and there’s forty over at the Lake Shore, and a lot more in Chaplin’s yards? There ain’t but one of me – however do you suppose I’m going to watch ’em all, even see that the boys keep oil in the boxes?’ ‘I don’t know anything about that,’ said he.

“‘Well now, look here, Jim,’ said I, ‘how many more of these cars have you got to unload?’ ‘Twelve,’ said he. ‘How soon can you get it done – that’s my question?’ ‘Oh, I’ll finish it up to-morrow morning.’ ‘Well, now, Jim,’ said I, ‘I want you to put on a couple of extra wagons and get these cars emptied by five o’clock this afternoon. Then I want you to get all our cars together over there in Chaplin’s yards, where I can keep an eye on ’em!’ ‘Oh, see here,’ said he, ‘I can’t do that, Hen. The sheriff –’

“‘Damn the sheriff,’ said I. ‘I ain’t going to hurt the sheriff. What I want is to get my cars together where I can know what’s being done to ’em.’

“Well, he didn’t want to do it, but some of the long green passed and then he thought maybe he could fix me up. There was a lot of other things I had to do that day – and a lot of other men to see. The despatcher for the Buffalo and Southwestern was one of ’em. Then at five o’clock, or a little before, I floated into the Swift House office and there were MacBayne and Charlie Greenman sitting around waiting for me. The old man had his watch in his hand. Charlie was walking up and down, very nervous. I came up sort of offhand and said: —

“‘Charlie, I want two of your biggest and strongest engines, and I want ’em up in Chaplin’s yard as soon as you can get ’em there.’

“‘What,’ said he, ‘on a foreign road?’ ‘Yes,’ said I, offhand like. Then I turned to the old man. ‘Now, Mister MacBayne,’ said I, ‘I want you to tell Charlie here that when those engines pass out of his division, they come absolutely under my control.’

“‘Oh, that’s all right, Hen,’ said Charlie, speaking up breathless.

“‘Yes, I know it is,’ said I, ‘but I want you to hear Mister MacBayne say it. Remember, when those engines leave your division, they belong to me until I see fit to bring ’em back.’

“The old man was looking queerer than ever. ‘See here, Hen,’ said he, ‘what devilment are you up to, anyway?’

“‘Nothing at all,’ said I. ‘I just want two engines. You can’t run a railroad without engines, Mister MacBayne.’

“Well,’ said he, then, ‘how about me – what do you want of me?’

“Why, I’ll tell you,’ said I. ‘Why don’t you hook your car on to No. 6 and go back to Pittsburg to-night?’ You should have seen his good eye light up at that. Getting out of the state suited him about as well as anything just then, and he didn’t lose any time about it. When he had gone, Charlie said: —

“Now, Hen, for heaven’s sake, tell me what you’re up to?”

“Not a bit of it,’ said I. ‘I don’t see what business it is of yours. You belong back on your division.’

“Well, I ain’t going,’ said he. ‘I’m going wherever you go to-night.’

“All right,’ said I; ‘I’m going to Shelby’s vaudeville.’

“That surprised him. But he didn’t say anything more. You remember old Shelby’s show there. I always used to go when I was in Buffalo of an evening.

“But about 11:30, when the show was over, Charlie began to get nervous again. ‘Well, Hen,’ he said, ‘where next?’

“I don’t know about you,’ said I, ‘but I’m going to stroll out to Chaplin’s yard before I turn in, and take a look at our cars. You’d better go to bed.’

“Not a bit of it,’ he broke out. ‘I’m going with you.’

“All right,’ said I, ‘come along. It’s a fine night.’

“Well, gentlemen, when we got out to the yards, there were our cars in two long lines on parallel tracks, seventy on one track and fifty on another – one thing bothered me, they were broken in four places at street crossings – and on the two next tracks beside them were Charlie’s two engines, steam up and headlights lighted. And, say, you never saw anything quite like it! The boys they’d sent with the engines weren’t anybody’s fools, and they had on about three hundred pounds of steam apiece – blowing off there with a noise you could hear for a mile, but the boys themselves weren’t saying a word; they were sitting around smoking their pipes, quiet as seven Sabbaths.

“When Charlie saw this laid out right before his eyes, he took frightened all of a sudden – his knees were going like that. He grabbed my arm and pulled me back into the shadow.

“Hen, for heaven’s sake, let’s get out of here quick. This means the penitentiary.’

“You can go,’ said I. ‘I didn’t invite you to the party.’

“Right beside the tracks there was a watch-box, shut up as if there wasn’t anybody in it, but I could see the light coming out at the top. It was going to be ticklish business, I knew that. We had to haul out over a drawbridge, for one thing, to get out of the yards, and then whistle for the switch over to the southwestern tracks. Had to use the signals of the other roads, too. But I was in for it.

“Well, Hen,’ said Charlie, ‘if you’re going to do it, what in – are you standing around for now?’

“Got to wait for the Lake Shore Express to go through,’ said I.

“Charlie sort of groaned at this and for an hour we sat there and waited. I tried to talk about the oil explosion down by Titusville, but Charlie, somehow, wasn’t interested. All the while those engines were blowing off tremendous, and the crews were sitting around just smoking steady.

“Finally, at one o’clock, I went over to the engineer of the first engine. ‘How many men have you got?’ said I.

“Four brakemen,’ he said, ‘each of us.’

“All right,’ said I. ‘I guess I don’t need to tell you what to do.’

“They all heard me, and say, you ought to have seen them jump up. The engineer was up and on his engine before I got through talking; and he just went a-flying down the yard, whistling for the switch. The four brakemen ran back along the fifty-car string. You see they had to couple up at those four crossings and that was the part I didn’t like a bit. But I couldn’t help it. The engineer came a-backing down very rapid, and bumped that front car as if he wanted to telescope it.

“Well, sir, they did it – coupled up, link and pin. The engineer was leaning ‘way out the window, and he didn’t wait very long after getting the signal, before he was a-hiking it down the yard, tooting his whistle for the draw. Heaven only knows what might have happened, but nothing did. He got over

the draw all right with his fifty cars going clickety – clickety – clickety behind him, and then I could see his rear lights and hear him whistling for the switch over to the southwestern tracks. Then I gave the signal for the other engine. Charlie, all this time, was getting worse and worse. He was leaning up against me now, just naturally hanging on to me, looking like a somnambulist. You could hear his knees batting each other. And the engineer of that second engine turned out to be in the same fix. He was so excited he never waited for the signal that the cars were all coupled up, and he started up with a terrific toot of his whistle and a yank on the couplings, leaving thirty cars and one brakeman behind. But I knew it would never do to call him back.

“Well, now, here is where it happened. That whistle was enough to wake the sleeping saints. And just as the train got fairly going for the draw, tooting all the way, the door of that watch-box burst open and three policemen men came running out, hard as they could run. Of course there was only one thing to do, and that’s just the thing that Charlie Greenman didn’t do. He turned and ran in the general direction of the Swift House as fast as those long legs of his could carry him. Two of the officers ran after him and the other came for me. I yelled to Charlie to stop, but he’d got to a point where he couldn’t hear anything. The other officer came running with his night-stick in the air, but my Scotch-Irish was rising, and I threw up my guard.

“‘Don’t you touch me,’ I yelled; ‘don’t you touch me!’

“‘Well, come along, then,’ said he.

“‘Not a bit of it,’ said I. ‘I’ve nothing to do with you.’

“‘Well, you ran,’ he yelled; ‘you ran!’

“I just looked at him. ‘Do you call this running?’ said I.

“‘Well,’ said he, ‘the other fellow ran.’

“‘All right,’ said I, ‘we’ll run after him.’ So we did. Pretty soon they caught Charlie. And I was a bit nervous, for I didn’t know what he might say. But he was too scared to say anything. So I turned to the officer.

“‘Now,’ said I, ‘suppose you tell us what it is you want?’

“‘We want you,’ said one of them.

“‘No, you don’t,’ said I.

“‘Yes, we do,’ said he.

“‘It seemed to be getting time for some bluffing, so I hit right out. ‘Where’s your headquarters?’ said I.

“‘Right over here,’ said he.

“‘All right,’ said I, ‘that’s where we’re going, right now. We’ll see if two railroad men can’t walk through Chaplin’s yards whenever they feel like it.’

“And all the while we were talking I could hear that second train a-whooping it up for the state line – clickety – clickety – whoo-oo-oo! – clickety – clickety – getting fainter and fainter.

“There was a big captain dozing on a bench in the station house. When he saw us come in, he climbed up behind his desk so he could look down on us – they like to look down at you, you know.

“‘Well, Captain,’ said the officer, ‘we’ve got ’em.’

“‘Yes,’ the captain answered, looking down with a grin, ‘I think you have.’

“‘Well now,’ said I, to the captain, ‘who have you got?’

“‘That’ll be all right,’ said he, with another grin.

“It was pretty plain that he wasn’t going to say anything. There was something about the way he looked at us and especially about that grin that started me thinking. I decided on bluff number two. I took out my pass case, opened it, and spread out annual passes on the Great Windy, the Erie, the South-eastern, and the Lake Shore. My name was written on all of them, H. L. Tiffany, Pittsburg. The minute the captain saw them he looked queer, and I turned to Charlie and told him to get out his passes, which he did. For a minute the captain couldn’t say anything; then he turned on those three

officers, and you ought to have heard what he said to them – gave 'em the whole forty-two degrees right there, concentrated.

“Well, gentlemen,’ he said to us, when he’d told the officer all that was on his mind, ‘this is pretty stupid business. I’m very sorry we’ve put you to this trouble, and I can tell you that if there is anything I can do to make it right, I’ll be more than glad to do it.’

“Well, there wasn’t anything in particular that I wanted just then except to get out of Buffalo quick. But I did stop to gratify my curiosity.

“Would you mind telling me, Captain,’ said I, ‘who you took us for?’

“The captain looked queer again, then he said, solemn, ‘We took you for body snatchers.’

“Body snatchers!’ I looked at Charlie, and Charlie, who was beginning to recover, looked at me.

“You see,’ the captain went on, ‘there’s an old building out there by the yard, and some young surgeons and medical students have been using it nights to cut up people in, and when the boys saw two well-dressed young fellows hanging around there in the middle of the night, they didn’t stop to think twice. I’m very sorry, indeed. I’ll send two of these men over to escort you to your hotel, with your permission.’

“That didn’t please me very much, but I couldn’t decline. So we started out, Charlie and I and the two coppers. But instead of going to the Swift House I steered them into the Mansion House, and dampened things up a bit. Then I got three boxes of cigars, Havana imported. I gave one to each of the officers, and on the bottom of the third I wrote, in pencil, ‘To the Captain, with the compliments of H. L. Tiffany, of the A. & G. W., Pittsburg, Pa.’ I thought he might have reason to be interested when he got his next morning’s paper in knowing just who we were. The coppers went back, tickled to death, and Charlie and I got out into the street.

“Well, Hen,’ said he, very quiet, ‘what are you going to do next?’

“You can do what you like, Charlie,’ I said, ‘but I’m going to take the morning three o’clock on the Michigan Central for Toronto.’ And Charlie, he thought maybe he’d go with me.”

Tiffany leaned back in a glow of reminiscence, and chuckled softly. Of the others, some had pushed back their chairs, some were leaning forward on the table. All had been, for half an hour, in the remote state of New York with this genial railroading pirate of the old school. Now, outside, a horse whinnied. Through the desert stillness came the clanking and coughing of a distant train. They were back in the gray Southwest, perhaps facing adventures of their own.

Carhart rose, for he had work to do at the headquarters tent. Young Van took the hint, and followed his example. But the long-nosed instrument man, the fire of a pirate soul shining out through his countenance, leaned eagerly forward. “What happened then?” he asked.

“Oh, nothing much,” Tiffany responded. “What could happen? Charlie and I came back from Toronto a few days later by way of Detroit.” Then his eye lighted up again. “But I like to think,” he added, “that next morning when that captain read about the theft of ninety gondola cars right out from under the sheriff’s nose by H. L. Tiffany, of Pittsburg, Pa., he was smoking one of said H. L. Tiffany’s cigars.”

The sun was up, hot and bright. The laborers and the men of the tie squad and the iron squad were straggling back to work. The wagons were backing in alongside the cars. And halfway down the knoll stood Carhart and Flint, both in easy western costume, Flint booted and spurred, stroking the neck of his well-kept pony.

“Well, so long, Paul,” said the bridge-builder.

“Good-by,” said Carhart.

It rested with these two lean men whether an S. & W. train should enter Red Hills before October. They both felt it, standing there at the track-end, their backs to civilization, their faces to the desert.

“All right, sir.” Flint got into his saddle. “All right, sir.” He turned toward the waiting wagon train. “Start along, boys!” he shouted in his thin voice.

Haddon galloped ahead with the order. The drivers took up their reins, and settled themselves for the long journey. Like Carhart's men, they were a mixed lot – Mexicans, half-breeds, native Americans of a curiously military stamp, and nondescripts – but good-natured enough; and Flint, believing with Carhart in the value of good cooks, meant to keep them good-natured. One by one the whips cracked; a confusion of English, Spanish, and French cries went up; the mules plunged; the heavy wagons, laden with derricks, timber, tools, camp supplies, and the inevitable pile-driver, groaned forward; and the La Paz Bridge outfit was off.

There was about the scene a sense of enterprise, of buoyant freedom, of deeds to be done. Flint felt it, as he rode at the head of his motley cavalcade; for he was an imaginative man. Young Van, standing by the headquarters tent, felt it, for he was young. Tiffany, still at breakfast, felt it so strongly that he swore most unreasoningly at the cook. Down on the job, the humblest stake man stood motionless until Old Van, who showed no signs of feeling anything, asked him if he hadn't had about enough of a sy-esta. As for Carhart, he was stirred, but his fancy did not roam far afield. From now on those things which would have it in their power to give him the deepest pleasure were the sight of gang after gang lifting cross-ties, carrying them to the grade, and dropping them into place; the sight of that growing line of stubby yellow timbers, and the sound of the rails clanking down upon them and of the rapid-fire sledges driving home the spikes.

Young Van poked his head in through the flaps.

"Well?" said the chief, looking up.

"Won't you come down, Mr. Carhart? The boys want you to drive the first spike."

Carhart smiled, then pushed back his chair, and strode out and down the slope to the grade.

"Stand back there, boys!" cried somebody.

Carhart caught up a sledge, swung it easily over his shoulder, and brought it down with a swing.

"There," he cried, entering into the spirit of the thing, "there, boys! That means Red Hills or bust."

The cheer that followed was led by the instrument man. Then Carhart, still smiling, walked back to his office. Now the work was begun.

But Old Van, the division engineer, was scowling. He wished the chief would quit stirring up these skylarking notions – on *his* division, anyway. It took just that much longer to take it out of the men – break them so you could drive them better.

CHAPTER IV

JACK FLAGG SEES STARS

It was a month later, on a Tuesday night, and the engineers were sitting about the table in the office tent. Scribner, the last to arrive, had ridden in after dusk from mile fourteen.

For two weeks the work had dragged. Peet, back at Sherman, had been more liberal of excuses than of materials. It was always the mills back in Pennsylvania, or slow business on connecting lines, or the car famine. And it was not unnatural that the name of the superintendent should have come to stand at the front for certain very unpopular qualities. Carhart had faith in Tiffany, but the railroad's chief engineer was one man in a discordant organization. Railroad systems are not made in a day, and the S. & W. was new, showing square corners where all should be polished round; developing friction between departments, and bad blood between overworked men. Thus it had been finally brought home to Paul Carhart that in order to carry his work through he must fight, not only time and the elements, but also the company in whose interest he was working.

Lately the office had received a few unmistakably vigorous messages from Carhart. Tiffany, too, had taken a hand, and had opened his mind to the Vice-president. The Vice-president had in turn talked with Peet, who explained that the materials were always sent forward as rapidly as possible, and added that certain delays had arisen from the extremely dangerous condition of Carhart's road-bed. Meantime, not only rails and ties, but also food and water, were running short out there at the end of the track.

"What does he say now, Paul?" asked Old Van, after a long silence, during which these bronzed, dusty men sat looking at the flickering lamp or at the heaps of papers, books, and maps which covered the table.

Carhart drew a crumpled slip of paper from his pocket and tossed it across the table. Old Van spread it out, and read as follows: —

MR. PAUL CARHART: Small delay due to shortage of equipment. Supply train started this morning, however. Regret inconvenience, as by order of Vice-president every effort is being made to supply you regularly.
L. W. PEET,
Division Superintendent.

"Interesting, isn't it!" said Carhart. "You notice he doesn't say how long the train has been on the way. It may not get here for thirty-six hours yet."

"Suppose it doesn't," put in Scribner, "what are we going to do with the men?"

"Keep them all grading," said Carhart.

"But —"

"Well, what is it? This is a council of war — speak out."

"Just this. Scraping and digging is thirsty work in this sun, and we haven't water enough for another half day."

"Young Van is due with water."

"Yes, he is due, Mr. Carhart, but you told him not to come back without it, and he won't."

"Listen!" Outside, in the night, voices sounded, and the creaking of wagons.

"Here he is now," said Carhart.

Into the dim light before the open tent stepped a gray figure. His face was thin and drawn; his hair, of the same dust color as his clothing, straggled down over his forehead below his broad hat. He nodded at the waiting group, threw off his hat, unslung his army canteen, and sank down exhausted on the first cot.

Old Van, himself seasoned timber and unable to recognize the limitations of the human frame, spoke impatiently, "Well, Gus, how much did you get?"

"Fourteen barrels."

"Fourteen barrels!" The other men exchanged glances.

"Why – why – " sputtered the elder brother, "that's not enough for the engines!"

"It's all we can get."

"Why didn't you look farther?"

"You'd better look at the mules," Young Van replied simply enough. "I had to drive them" – he fumbled at his watch – "an even eighteen hours to get back to-night." And he added in a whimsical manner that was strange to him, "I paid two dollars a barrel, too."

Carhart was watching him closely. "Did you have any trouble with your men, Gus?" he asked.

Young Van nodded. "A little."

After a moment, during which his eyes were closed and his muscles relaxed, he gathered his faculties, lighted a cigarette, and rose.

"Hold on, Gus," said Carhart. "What are you going to do?"

"Bring the barrels up by our tent here. It isn't safe to leave them on the wagons. The men – some of them – aren't standing it well. Some are 'most crazy." He interrupted himself with a short laugh. "Hanged if I blame them!"

"You'd better go to bed, Gus," said the chief. "I'll look after the water."

But Young Van broke away from the restraining hand and went out.

Half a hundred laborers were grouped around the water wagons in oppressive silence. Vandervelt hardly gave them a glance.

"Dimond," he called, "where are you?"

A man came sullenly out of the shadows.

"Take a hand here – roll these barrels in by Mr. Carhart's tent." A murmur spread through the group. More men were crowding up behind. But the engineer gave his orders incisively, in a voice that offered no encouragement to insubordination. "You two, there, go over to the train and fetch some skids. I want a dozen men to help Dimond – you – you – " Rapidly he told them off. "The rest of you get away from here – quick."

"What you goin' to do with that water?" The voice rose from the thick of the crowd. It drew neither explanation nor reproof from Young Van; but his manner, as he turned his back and, pausing only to light another cigarette, went rapidly to work, discouraged the laborers, and in groups of two and three they drifted off to their quarters.

The men worked rapidly, for Mr. Carhart's assistant had a way of taking hold himself, lending a hand here or a shoulder there, and giving low, sharp orders which the stupidest men understood. As they rolled the barrels along the sides of the tent and stood them on end between the guy ropes Paul Carhart stood by, a rolled-up map in his hand, and watched his assistant. He took it all in – the cowed, angry silence of the men, the unfailing authority of the young engineer. No one felt the situation more keenly than Carhart, but he had set his worries aside for the moment to observe the methods of the younger man. Once he caught himself nodding with approval. And then, when he was about to turn away and resume his study at the table beneath the lantern, an odd scene took place. The work was done. Vandervelt stood wiping his forehead with a handkerchief which had darkened from white to rich gray. The laborers had gone; but Dimond remained.

"That's all, Dimond," said Vandervelt.

But the man lingered.

"Well, what do you want?"

"It's about this water. The boys want to know if they ain't to have a drink."

"No; no more to-night," replied Young Van.

"But – but – " Dimond hesitated.

“Wait a minute,” said Van abruptly. He entered the tent, found his canteen where he had dropped it, brought it out, and handed it to Dimond.

“This is my canteen. It’s all I have a right to give anybody. Now, shut up and get out.”

Dimond hesitated, then swung the canteen over his shoulder and disappeared without a word.

“Gus,” said Paul Carhart, quietly.

“Oh! I didn’t see you there.”

“Wasn’t that something of a gallery play?”

“No, I don’t think it was. It will show them that we are dealing squarely with them. I had a deuce of a time on the ride, and Dimond really tried, I think, to keep the men within bounds. They are children, you know, – children with whiskey throats added, – and they can’t stand it as we can.”

“Gus,” said the chief, taking the boy’s arm and drawing him toward the tent, “it’s time you got to sleep. I shall need you to-morrow.”

The other engineers were still sitting about the table, talking in low tones. Carhart rejoined them. Young Van dropped on a cot in the rear and fell asleep with his boots on.

“Old Van is telling how the pay-slips came in to-day,” said Scribner.

Carhart nodded. “Go ahead.” He had found the laborers, headed by the Mexicans, so impossibly deliberate in their work that he had planned out a system of paying by the piece. When the locomotive whistle blew at night, each man was handed a slip stating the amount due him. At the end of the week the slips were to be cashed, and to-day the first payment had been made. “Go ahead,” he repeated. “How much did it cost us?”

“About seventy-five dollars more than last week,” replied Old Van. “So that, on the whole, we got a little more work out of them. But here’s what happened. When the whistle blew and I got out my satchel, nobody came. I called to a couple of them to hurry up if they wanted their pay, but they shook their heads. Finally, just two men came up and handed in all the slips.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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